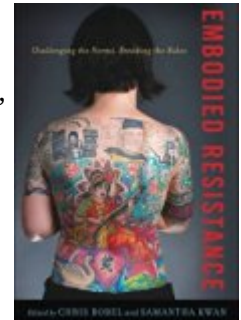


Chris Bobel, Samantha Kwan, eds. *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011. 272 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8265-1787-6.



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Embodied Resistance is a collection of interdisciplinary ethnographic essays and personal accounts that strives to paint a picture of lived experience from the perspective of body outlaws: individuals and groups whose bodies variously transgress dominant social norms, whether intentionally or not. Dominated by sociological and anthropological essays, the collection touches a wide range of topics, from life as a gay "bear" and female genital pain, to the embodied practices of religious defectors from Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. The editors, Chris Bobel and Samantha Kwan, situate the volume within interdisciplinary efforts to identify social and cultural body norms and the processes by which individuals are encouraged or compelled to conform to them, a growing area of study we might call "critical embodiment studies." Intended as a teaching tool, the volume does not provide a definitive overview of current issues in this field, but rather encourages discussion through concrete case studies and personal experiences.

The book is organized thematically into four sections. Each section includes two "Living Resistance" personal essays relating to the theme of the chapter. The essays are generally written in language accessible to readers in various disciplines. Each chapter is relatively short, making comparison of various essays a manageable and worthwhile class assignment. There is also a section of discussion questions, suggestions for class activities, and additional resources at the back of the book, a useful addition for instructors.

The essays range not only in topic but also in method and sophistication. Unlike much other work in critical embodiment studies, this collection focuses on the margins where individuals fail to conform, choose to transgress, and everything in between. Some essays confront very intentional, overt forms of embodied resistance--like women who refuse to shave their body hair--while others address embodiments that by virtue of their interstitial existence fail to be accounted for by bodily norms. A chapter on transgender and queer individuals' difficulties at work with gen-

dered washrooms is a particularly poignant, and politically urgent, example of the latter. The chapter "The Transformation of Bodily Practices among Religious Defectors" is well informed and simply fascinating, delving into bodily practices that construct and express one's belonging to, or rejection of, religious traditions. "It's Important to Show Your Colours," an essay on a Metropolitan Community Church, paints a welcoming, and indeed colorful, picture of an "outlaw" group that uses bodily gestures, touching, and clothing to build their own, non-heteronormative, Christian community. This exemplary chapter demonstrates the creative power of bodily practices, illuminated with a critical eye toward how bodies express, construct, and transgress norms. Other essays draw more curious conclusions that could benefit from further engagement with embodiment studies literature. The authors of the paper on the Red Hat Society ("Give me a Boa and Some Bling!") insist that the older women engaged in these social groups "indicate that they are not 'past their prime,' unattractive, or no longer sexy" (p. 74). The problematic association of feminine value with sexiness or attractiveness to men is entirely glossed over. Curiously, the evidence presented seems to suggest that the women are in fact not as concerned with being "sexy" as with being active. "I mean, you just DO things," one participant is quoted as saying and the fact that women's activity is associated with sexiness is especially troubling, which recalls feminist criticisms of objectification and hypersexualization (p. 74). Nonetheless, the collection as a whole provides provocative opportunities for discussion. The discussion questions also do a commendable job of filling in any theoretical or interpretive gaps in the essays, though there are inexplicably no questions for reflection accompanying any of the "Living Resistance" chapters.

While Bobel and Kwan acknowledge the lack of "high-quality, sociologically informed, and original works on masculinities and queer sexualities, along with globally situated studies," their re-

sponse to cognate silences is limited (p. 3). For instance, there is also a lack of serious engagement with other embodied experiences, such as disability and race. There is one "Living Resistance" essay written by the life partner of an individual with quadriplegia, but no critical engagement with theoretical works on disability. Similarly, a few essays mention race--"The Specter of Excess: Race, Class, and Gender in Women's Body Hair Narratives," for example--but there are no extended discussions of racialized embodiments.

As a whole, this volume calls attention to the various practices we engage in to negotiate our bodies and the bodily norms we value or to which we feel social pressure to conform. While there certainly is something inspirational about individuals overcoming socially constructed fears and pain in order to live their bodies in ways "outside" the norm, this volume also raises the question of whether or not transgression is in itself valuable. There are norms most people are reluctant to see transgressed--certain health norms, for example--which can explain some of the ambivalence anticipated by the authors of the chapters on anorexia ("Anorexia as a Choice") and self-injury ("What I Had to Do to Survive"). What if particular transgressions gain normative power themselves, as the authors of the essay on women's body hair removal worry? Can transgression be an end in itself? Surely if our goal is simply to transgress, we continue to act in relation to the problematic norm in question. Perhaps we need ways to think and act, not outside of, but *away from* a norm. Questions for reflection on the purpose of embodied resistance as such would have been a useful thread to pull throughout the volume to build reflective bridges between chapters.

Embodied Resistance is a valuable contribution to classrooms of any humanities discipline. It is an excellent resource for teachers looking to introduce embodiment studies to students and for researchers looking for case studies, or for anyone looking for personal inspiration. Upper-level

sociology or women's studies classes in body politics could greatly benefit from this volume as an accompaniment to more theoretically dense texts. While the collection has its weaker pieces, as a whole it is able to bring forward central issues of critical embodiment studies in a way that will inspire curiosity, discussion, and perhaps, personal reflection and transformation.

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